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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The following letter was written by Miss A. Aidin of Iran, who is working with the Church Missionary Society, and who, following long service in educational work, has developed the programme which is here described.

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EVANGELISM BY CORRESPONDENCE IN THE NEAR EAST

Bible study by correspondence is a method of evangelism which we have been trying out since 1955, and I would like to tell you a little about our aims, methods, difficulties and successes.

Like all evangelism, the aim is to make the Good News known to as many people as we can, but for people who have no background of Christian knowledge, the message of the Gospel is very hard to understand. The Bible Society aims at only selling the Bible and portions of the scriptures, but the colporteur is able to talk about the portion he sells, and to give some sort of introduction so as to enable his customer to start reading with some idea of what it is about. Sometimes of course the purchaser just walks off with his book, and we thank God that again and again we hear of how God has used His Word, and people have come back to buy more. The important thing is to get people to read God's Word for themselves, and this is the primary aim of the Bible study Correspondence course.

It is easy to say 'get people to read', but how can this be done? Well some people, especially students, like to have a set task of reasonable proportions, with questions which must be answered, and then to get the answers back, marked, with corrections and comments. They like to feel that their work is improving, and when the course is satisfactorily finished, it is gratifying to get a little certificate and a nice picture of Christ. People here love pictures and in tea shops one frequently sees highly coloured pictures of the Madonna and child, so this gift is acceptable, and can be shown to one's friends.

REFERAT FÜR EVANGELISATION · STUDIENABTEILUNG · OEKUMENISCHER RAT DER KIRCHEN

DEPARTMENT ON EVANGELISM · DIVISION OF STUDIES · WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

DÉPARTEMENT D'ÉVANGÉLISATION · DIVISION DES ÉTUDES · CONSEIL ŒCUMÉNIQUE DES ÉGLISES

Then there is another attraction in the correspondence course. Have you noticed how in some magazines and journals readers are invited to ask advice on their personal problems? What makes people write? It is the cloak of anonymity.

This is a very real help to those who want to know about Christianity, want to ask questions but do not know much, and do not want to commit themselves. This is reasonable; if a man goes to a Christian reading room or to Church, his friends and neighbours will want to know why he goes. Is there a chance of good employment? Or is he getting lessons in English? Or has he joined some sort of club where there are pretty girls? These are the most charitable suppositions; some one will suggest that it is a political organization and members are certainly paid. It cuts very little ice to deny all these and to say that the simple and sole reason is to learn about Christ. "Ha! Ha!" say the busy bodies, "We know better than that! Why not own up and tell us the truth?" Then if he does convince them that he really is seeking the "right way" into which every good Moslem daily prays to be led, he comes up against antagonism and suspicion; can it really be possible that he is studying Christianity without any other motives?

Learning by Correspondence has another advantage; within the last month, a quiet young man, who was first interested in Christianity through the correspondence course and is now a Christian, has introduced first one and then another of his friends who live several hundred miles away from here, there are very few Christians, and no church in their home town. Both have started on the course, and their mutual friend has put them in touch with each other so that they can study together if they like.

Sometimes people say they want to know more, but their work hours don't allow them to get to meetings or regular lessons. Again the correspondence course can be studied as fast or as slowly as suits the student, and the work can be done at any convenient time. I have had students who send in their answers within a month or six weeks, others arrive within ten days accompanied by a letter asking for immediate attention, "I have the time to study now, and I want to finish this course and get on to the next, please reply by return".

When students are keen we send them "flyers" or leaflets recommending Christian books, and in this way a certain amount of Christian literature is sold.

A very real problem is getting the course known. We do not advertize in the papers, but a man may see a notice in a bookshop window or in a reading room, a travelling evangelist or colporteur may give him the first lesson and pass on, in this way by whatever means he gets it, there is no obligation involved, no suspicion incurred. He can take it or leave it. It may be only curiosity which impels him to write to the "Principal of the Correspondence Course, Post Office Box 7". There are no financial attractions. He gets back the first lesson on Mark with a letter telling him how to get a Gospel of Mark and inviting him to pray, study, send in his answers and to ask questions. The questions are so arranged that both the lesson notes and the chapter in the Gospel must be read. One student, when answering

a question wrote that "God provided John the Baptist with suitable food and raiment"! Obviously he hadn't got a Gospel, so he bought one from us! God reveals Himself to man through Jesus Christ; He is "The Way, the Truth, and the Life". The Arabic word for religion is"the Way". Religion is the Way by which we come to know God; but if our religion, or our ideas, blur and darken our Vision, we will get a distorted picture of Him. It is not what you or I think about God, our speculations and imaginings do not reveal Him, the "Only Begotten Son which is in the bosum of the Father. He hath declared Him". To get to know Jesus Christ, and to get some small inkling of the holiness and love of God, we must study the Gospels.

The disciples of old, only little by little came to know Jesus; they saw His works, they lived with Him and they were continually asking themselves "What manner of Man is this?".

"These holy pages ---------- will give you Christ Himself, talking, healing, dying, rising, the whole Christ in the Word. They will give Him to you in an intimacy so close that He would be less visible to you if He stood before your eyes." (From the Preface to Erasmus' first Greek Testament).

This whole 'Impersonal contact' should be steeped in prayer; each paper corrected, each question answered must be done with the guidance of the Holy Spirit: the questions vary, one asks about the Christian teaching about celibacy, another wants proofs of the authenticity of the New Testament, another wrote to say Christ's teaching about turning the other cheek is very difficult and adds "Dear Teacher, do you carry this out?"

When we speak of this as a new venture, it is because it could not have been used fifty years ago. Today literacy is rapidly increasing, and people want something to read. The postal system is much more efficient and for a penny letters can be sent throughout the length and breadth of the country. There are High School and University students whose minds are full of eager questions about the existence of God, and the implications of Darwinism, Materialism, Communism etc. The radio and newspapers throughout the whole country are waking men up. Many of the old foundations of belief are shaken and here it is that the Christian message is needed. For the sake of our Lord and for the sake of those who know not to whom they should go, we must not fail.

The next question which arises is how can the correspondence be followed up, and can there be value in long distance evangelism unless it issues in personal contact of some sort?

Before answering these questions I would like to point out that Evangelism by Correspondence only claims to be an ideal way to start; But in answer to the above questions let it be said that undoubtedly the lines of personal and impersonal contact should and do converge for all who are truly interested. Some who have started the course drop it; lack of interest or pressure of work may be the reason. A few have written to say they have already studied Islam and Christianity, and do not want any Christian teaching. But those who are interested - and one can judge their keenness by their answers, are asked whether they want to be put in touch with the Christians in their own cities. In one city

I know of several who regularly went to the Christian reading room and had teaching there and three of them were baptized.

On the other hand a student in another town said he did not want an introduction; he may have been afraid of the consequences.

In a very backward city where there are no missionaries, a young man bought a New Testament from a Bible Society colporteur who gave him the first lesson of the correspondence course to help him to understand the Gospel. He started studying with nine of his friends in the bazaar; he wrote "some of my friends are illiterate, will it be alright if I read the passages to them and write down their answers?" Later he wrote - " a group of my friends come to my house once a week in the evening and we study the lessons together. There are a great many things I don't understand; I wish you could let me have some clear explanations beforehand". After some time I had to go to this town, so I wrote telling him when and where I would be, and saying how much I would like to meet him. He came to see me, I found he was a very quiet, shy student with a profound knowledge of his own religion and a sincere faith in Christ, coupled with a desire to learn more. After lessons with the pastor he joined the Church. I also met several of his friends.

Twice we have had small residential conferences lasting five or six days, with a minimum charge; from three or four cities, two or three hundred miles away, those who seemed interested were invited, each time ten or twelve came, and we found that the Bible study, the discussion groups and the social life of the conference was something entirely new for some who had never met Christians before; they made friends with the Pastor and various members of the Church, and later two or three from these groups decided for Christ. Colporteurs and evangelists who have handed out these lessons, normally can retrace their steps at a later date, and see all who want to come to them.

We thank God for the freedom we do enjoy and pray that we may use it to the full. We have now got lessons on Mark, Luke, and "God's plan for Man", Acts is next on the list. Please remember we have not had a great deal of experience; if any one can give us suggestions as to how we can improve our methods and benefit by your experience we shall be most grateful.